

The Anxious Actor

A Thesis Exhibition Statement

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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University of Saskatchewan

By

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis exhibition to my mother Margaret Logan, my late father Ken Logan and to my husband, Ned Garstad.

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The Anxious Actor

Supplementary Paper for Thesis Exhibition

By: Zachari Logan

Introduction

The collection of paintings and drawings constituting the thesis exhibition *The Anxious Actor* are rooted within the visual language of contemporary realist figurative painting and drawing, with a focus on the male body. Traditionally in western culture, the depiction of the human form, both male and female, has sought to reinforce hierarchical constructions and meta-narratives implicit in religious and imperialistic structures. I paint and draw my own body as subject, exploring personal narratives that contradict these pre-existing notions. As a queer man interested in the vocabulary of realist figurative painting, my body is a catalyst for my fascination with stereotypic masculine portrayals.

Utilizing historic themes of male bravado, heroism and narcissism I juxtapose the mundane realities of everyday contemporary life. My narratives are situated within the complex visual languages of Neo-classical, Baroque, Rococo and Renaissance style painting. These specific pictorial vocabularies add both psychological and metaphoric weight to my conceptual process; locating my marginalized identity within historic and contemporary archetypes.

The use of the male body in contemporary art has become a more common source for subject matter. However, the use of self as subject by contemporary male artists is still somewhat rare. Current figurative artists such as Lucien Freud, Philip Pearlstein, Odd Nerdrum, along with artists who portray more exclusively homoerotic imagery like Attila Richard Lukacs and Paul Cadmus (Fig. 1, 2), frequently use the male figure to devise compelling subject matter about identity. These artists rarely, if ever, exclusively use their *own* bodies as subject to convey such discourse though. *The Anxious Actor* involves the viewer in theatrical masculine portrayals of multi-layered scenarios, making the audience active participants in a constructed self-referential dialogue. These atypical portrayals, enacted using my own body, undercut ideas of an accepted singular, heterosexist masculine enterprise.



Fig.1



Fig. 2

The Anxious Actor & the Theatre of Masculine Performance

It was during my undergraduate degree that I became fascinated with queer theory, gender polemics and the historic representation of masculine archetypes. I developed a particular interest in *bears*, a queer sub-culture of men who self-identify as hyper-masculine. By showing-off particular physical attributes, such as extreme body and facial hair along with other stereotypic hyper-masculine costuming like the fetishizing of sportswear, cigars and beer, these men create a fissure in what the dominant hetero-normative society, along with the media, portray as gay or queer. The depiction of these men revealed a visual metaphor in which I explored masculinity, or rather all gender as costumed performance. My BFA exhibition *Same Difference*, consisted of images of these men compiled from ubiquitous sources, like internet porn, men's fashion magazines and vintage photographs.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Following my undergraduate degree, I continued constructing bodies of work that pertained to gender, sexuality and intersecting queer narratives. It was not until entering the graduate program that I countenanced using myself as subject for the further visual exploration of masculine archetypes. The exclusive use of my body in *The Anxious Actor* has aided in the production of a more nuanced visual understanding of masculine portrayals. I have much more control over how I present my own image as opposed to images of men I do not know and have little or no psychological connection to. In developing a body of work that features me as the sole figurative element, I am able to locate myself in relation to my viewer. With this single source, I narrate embodied personal experiences about my life as a gay man, my relationship with my body and how others perceive it.

Initially what captivated me about my own body as potential tool or area of investigation was how I as a man, like many men, regardless of sexual preference, fit specific gender roles and defy others. My body is a liminal site of visual investigation, containing the ambiguities of my own lived experiences. These visual manifestations of myself have proved to be fertile ground in revealing specific aspects of masculinity and the performative anxieties that accompany its veracity. In *Dandies and Desert Saints*, by James Eli Adams, Adams quotes David Gilmore's cross-cultural

survey of norms of masculinity, arguing,

“Manhood almost universally assumes the form of a ‘pose’ that is deeply conflicted, pressured, and forced, a mask of omni-competence and an almost obsessive independence. Gilmore asserts that as the Theatrical tropes imply, even normative masculinity is inserted as an unending performance, in which, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu, a man must “offer himself to be seen, constantly put himself in the gaze of others” (Gilmore 51)(1).

The Anxious Actor explores these particular anxieties along with the disposition of theatrical masculine tropes, involving the spectator in a ‘posed’ queer narrative; creating a stage to explore contemporary issues of male identity.

The act of weightlifting, attaining a well-sculpted body is envisioned stereotypically as a visual mark of masculine enterprise. This is an act I partake in on a daily basis. My body, painted or drawn, infers a performative athleticism. This athleticism coupled with the theatricality of a doppelganger or triplet existing on the same stage can evoke feelings of competition, fear, mortality and omnipotence- all in relation to performance anxiety (Fig. 5, 6, 7, 8). In Sigmund Freud’s *The Uncanny*, Freud supposes, that in the primal psyche of the human being, the visually depicted double was a narcissistic assurance of immortality, a depiction derived out of ‘unbound self-love’. With the surmounting of this stage in man’s thinking however, the double reversed its effect, becoming the

1 James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p15

uncanny harbinger of one's own mortality (2). Like Freud asserts about the man's thinking however, the double reversed its effect, becoming the uncanny nature of the double, these composed dualities can evoke a sense of strangeness and are at odds with each other simply because of their visually coupled existence. My self-interactions establish a dialogue, which is for me, both internal and highly personal. These exchanges may also allow for the viewer a space to question stereotypes of queer self-love, privacy, desire and ultimately mortality. In the triple figure compositions, the additional drama of a third personality becomes apparent with the addition of a third self (Fig. 7). This third self introduces to the audience the relational dynamic of "three's a crowd", a condition in which two will co-operate in a power struggle over the third. I hint at this dynamic by altering the wardrobe of one of the figures in the compositions subtly othering his body from the other two.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig.

2 Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, ed. Adam Phillips. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003.), p 134.

The repetitive depiction of self in *The Anxious Actor* may indicate for the viewer an innate narcissism on the part of myself, the artist. This questioning of intentions, is intended to contribute to a sense of discomfort within my narrative structure. A person auto-eroticizing his or her own image, seeing in him or herself that which is sexually appealing is an aspect of everyday life that I wanted to reveal in *The Anxious Actor*. In heterosexist society, the act of gazing at one's own self is stereotypically accepted behavior for women and homosexual men as it is considered to be an effeminate act. This type of conduct is often stereotyped to have serious homoerotic undertones.

Auto-eroticization is so ubiquitous, particularly to most men, that they often rebuff doing it. Unapologetically employing the rhetoric of self-satisfaction within my work helps to de-stabilize heterocentric notions of queer relationship dynamics. While playing nicely into the stereotype that homosexual men and women substitute another person of the same sex in place of their own unattainable selves. Many heterosexual people have a tendency as well, to assume that there are specifically gendered roles to be played out or filled within same-sex relationships. These roles are typecast heterosexual roles such as *butch* and *femme*, *homemaker* and *breadwinner*, *overly emotional* and *stoic or unemotional*, *top* and *bottom*, along with a string of other pairings. This inclination to define queer

relationships with heterosexual relational stereotypes, stems from society at large defining relationships of a foreign nature by that which they are familiar or comfortable with.

Naked VS. Nude

Historically, the body is an enduring visual subject. The prominence of representing male and female bodies, and the contexts that gendered bodies have been presented, is of great importance to me. My exhibition, *The Anxious Actor* confronts the dichotomy of nude vs. naked, a dichotomy that has greatly affected the ways in which male and female bodies have been depicted. Conventionally, the female body is depicted in a more passive, sensual manner when revealed in western art. I would venture to claim this for all art traditions (see fig 10, 12, 16). As a result of the male gaze, historically female bodies are only elevated visually to the status of sexually desired object, in the *naked* state.



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

The male body, from an art-historical lens conveyed visual themes of heroism and male bravado and seldom if ever notions of a strictly sexual nature, known as the state of *nudity*, shown in Fig. 9, 14.

Representations of the male nude in ancient Greece related strictly

to either the depiction of deities or to the heroism of the male ideal, a highly muscular physique. This ideal has lingered in western society- and thus in our visual language. historically, there have been some painters such as Caravaggio, who are celebrated for the ways in which they defiantly represented the male figure; however even Caravaggio cloaked homoerotic images under the guise of religious themes.



Fig. 12

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

Fig. 15

Fig. 16

A naked body, refers again, to a figure stripped of its heroic and idyllic codification, reserved for the portrayal of female sexualization. This passive state, nakedness, through much of history, has been regarded as taboo. In using myself as subject, I am strategically playing on this fact. I have a well-sculpted male body, and although theatrical, my poses and gestures are largely mundane, as is the costuming which juxtaposes my physicality. These created visual manifestations allow for my body to be viewed as an object of a more vulnerable gaze.

There is a sexual horizon from the revealing of my body as naked and the sporting of particular items of clothing in these pieces only en-

hances this revelation. The avoidance of grand heroic narratives, coupled with subtle usage of particular objects and articles of clothing, places my body in a realm typically reserved for the feminine. Considered to be *ideal*, (again, a societal standard ironically set in part by art-historic portrayals) my predominantly uncovered body engages the sheer normality of desire— of the gaze turned in on itself. This narrative structure is designed to playfully provoke the viewer, while unsettling notions of established masculine behavior.

Mapping it Out: Picturing Queer Spaces

The ways I render form and space, often with smooth continuous tone, realistic colour, proportions and scale, and rigorous draftsmanship are an effort to represent what I observe in an acute visual manner. I have learned many of the techniques I utilize in my work, through the study of Neo-Classical, Baroque, Renaissance and Rococo artists. These particular art-historic styles interest me because of the ways in which my narrative content forms within them. Rather than paint itself being *the* content, like that of a modernist painter such as Jackson Pollock, my mimetically painted scenes invent a narrative structure. I situate my themes such as a baroque or neo-classical artist might, within a dramatic setting employing political statements about the male body.

My process of painting is one, which includes multiple layers of paint called glazing. I begin with a drawing on a colored ground and paint over the drawing with blacks and whites ending up with a grey image made up of contrasting light and dark values. I then begin layering overtop the grey with layers of luminous, transparent colour enabling my renderings of the human form to read optically in a more three dimensional volumetric manner. I have studied these historic genres to a large degree in print, having little or no access to the actual work itself. Through this mimetic method of portraying my body, my conceptual

needs in representing the male form are fulfilled, in a highly representational style. This I believe contributes to the psychological intensity of my paintings. My aim is to create a variance between my body's visual depiction and the theatrical narratives I am employing.

Contemporary figurative painter Jenny Saville uses her own image repeatedly to elicit a sense of psychological tension; however, Seville's tension is wrought out of a visceral distortion of her figure and an emotive, energetic use of paint (fig. 19). My work involves a calculated mimetic use of materials- absenting the indication of brushstroke or expressive mark-making. This method allows for the creation of refined often emptied spaces that express a consciousness of isolation, again enhancing the tension within my narratives.

The pictorial space in these paintings is quite shallow, with enough room for the figures to exist and interact. This lack of spatial depth is referential to Neo-Classical space in painting, in which Spartan bodies are politicized as the epitome of the strength of empire. My figure's physicality, mirroring the quintessence of a typical neo-classical body, appears to fulfill similar narratives but is contrasted by commonplace activities and interactions (rather than a sword, I engage a Starbucks cup). The containment of space in these painting and drawings is structured to illustrate a sense of claustrophobia and is directly referential

to the viewer's own body. This is a space that is in-between, a visual realm that is too small to exist within comfortably, but is considerable enough to contemplate being in, making the spectator implicit in the *absence* of elbow room.



Fig. 17

Fig. 18

Fig. 19

Fig. 20

Fig. 21

The predominant grey backgrounds in my paintings are metaphoric visual spaces that represent the stage on which I reside, or rather where my body resides. They are highly theatrical spaces, referential of the staged act itself- whatever that act might be. The use of cast shadows, directional lighting and gesture make site-specific references to both the history of painting and photography. The light sources appear from many angles, casting numerous shadows— establishing a visual metaphor for the multiplicities of meaning these bodies exist within. The generic grey is reminiscent of a portrait studio one might find in a Wal-Mart or Sears, and similarly to that of a 19th century photographic portrait parlour. The grey is also a direct homage to the spaces in which Eduard Manet paints his figures. (See below, Fig. 17, 18) These paintings and drawings depict marginal sites; sites that are metaphoric of the queer spaces, I as a gay

man, fill in my daily life. This milieu also doubles as a closet or 'closeted' site.

Propped-up and Posing

The earlier paintings *Wrong Team* and *Cocked*, are explicitly engaged in undercutting the depiction of stereotypic male archetypes, such as the athlete, the hunter, the military man. The spaces in which they are contained suggest a pose, often humorous, a single snapshot like that of a photo-shoot (Fig. 18). The *In and Out* series and the *Crowd* series set up narratives which still contain critical humour but are less specific in the narration of male roles, especially the doppelganger and triple figure compositions. I engage gestures that are theatrical and at the same time domestic. In choosing to cover the feet and head most predominately, I am subtly implying an unused fig leaf, referencing the tradition of concealing male genitalia. This ambiguity carries with it a layering of multiple possibilities and more potential for interpretation.

Many of the props used are personal to me, they are items that I wear and interact with on a daily basis, they are autobiographical and functional. In Fig. 23, the painting titled "Parka" is an obvious reference to the jacket I am wearing in the painting. Most of the clothing items, like the non-clothing objects, are also referential to interior and domestic spaces. The socks, plastic bag, shoes, underwear, jacket, hunters cap, along with the cleaning buckets, my cat *Pharaoh* and even my own foreskin possess similar visual importance to cover and to reveal. For instance, I see a

parallel between the socks on my one figure's feet and my foreskin I'm tugging with the other figure (Fig. 6, 22). Both are tubular and have the ability to cover-up and to thus, reveal. Similarly, the Sobey's bag, function in this manner, even the buckets I'm standing on in *In and Out 3* (Fig. 8) are referential to the pose I've taken and the exposure of my anus- the word 'bucket' a queer euphemism, I've heard used as a stand in for the anus. These references are somewhat obscure yet highly specific, not unlike the hidden meanings within various religious painting traditions.



Fig. 22

Fig. 23

Fig. 24

The props illustrate a relationship between the multiple manifestations of self, establishing the bodies in relation to one another. Sometimes in an attempt to isolate the figures and other times establishing interaction. In the single figure compositions, the objects encourage a dialogue more directly with their audience, as if to invoke participation from them. Most of the clothing items, which accessorize my nudity, are items of clothing that would not necessarily have significant visual prominence on the body if I were otherwise fully clothed. As stated earlier these

items reference domesticity, they are also signifiers of age, class and more importantly place. The running shoes, and socks are trendy and sporty, referencing athleticism and the erotic- they also speak to a sense of normality. The parka most certainly alludes to a feeling of isolation- but also insulation as outerwear has the function of being both warm and inviting. The 'Huskie Athletics' t-shirt in the drawing titled *Huskie* (Fig. 25) is specific to the University of Saskatchewan, undercutting images of bravado that are validated by this institutions athletics as a whole. This



Fig. 25

drawing also situates me personally within the establishment, evolving the image associated with the university's logo.

In the *Crowd* series, each figure engages the same mundane object. In *Crowd 1* a Starbucks coffee, and in *Crowd 2* iPods (Fig, 25, 26, 27, 28). These 'fashionable' objects, coffee and MP3 devices, are meant to be read as class signifiers, engaging my body in similar ways as the props do in the paintings. They introduce a discourse about my body and how certain objects codify lived experiences. These objects articulate a sense of ambiguity; they are contemporary, and lack any overt sense of

bravado. Products, such as an iPod, or a Starbucks coffee are of a more gender inclusive nature. These items are considered unisex, an aspect I use intentionally to visually engage the ways in which our bodies are marketed to in contemporary society.

When one sees a commercial for a truck they can easily recognize who is being targeted- as with cleaning products, these products are gender coded. Within this series of drawings a visual layering emerges that breaks down ideas of a singular hetero-normative enterprise. This deconstruction appears from the coupling of two disparate visual languages, contemporary advertising tropes juxtaposed with neo-classical renderings of my body. The lexis of contemporary advertising (revealed through the depicted interactions with my iPod, Starbucks), coupled with the impetus of neo-classical renderings of my body, blurs established pictorial realms, promoting embodied queer spaces.



Fig. 26



Fig. 27



Fig. 28



Fig. 29

Conclusion

My Exhibition, *The Anxious Actor* defines narrative through the juxtaposition of contemporary masculine realities and the historic re-visioning of male archetypes. These theatrical portrayals, executed using my own body as the exclusive site of subject, sets a stage that involves a witnessing by my audience, implying the inclusion of their own physicality. *The Anxious Actor* attempts to locate the viewer somewhere in-between, generating ambiguous narrative tropes in relation to male representation. The recognition of this space is generated either as a simplistic grey portrait studio, or other in-elaborate tableau-like space— allowing the spectator an empathic place of entry into a visually liminal site of identity.

This locale provides metaphoric possibilities that reveal queer space as an exciting *othered* place. A place where identity is not a series of binary actions restricted by the conventional interpretation of historic or contemporary beliefs. The narratives within *The Anxious Actor* aim to unearth masculinity from the weight of oppressive heterosexist ideologies by playfully incorporating elements from both the past and the present. This fusion of masculine tropes reinvents queer space and establishes a dialogue between contemporary identities, my own lived experiences and particular histories of male representation.

The Anxious Actor: Installed



The Anxious Actor, Gordon Snelgrove Gallery. Install shots 1, 2. (Photo credits, Karla Griffin.)



The Anxious Actor, Gordon Snelgrove Gallery. Install shots, 3, 4. (Photo Credits, Karla Griffin.)



The Anxious Actor, Gordon Snelgrove Gallery. Install shots 5, 6 & 7. (Photo Credits, Karla Griffin.)

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